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USSR-US: SOVIET PUBLIC TREATMENT OF US DEBATE ON SALT

This report reviews and assesses Soviet comment on US SALT discussions since the May 1972 summit agreements.

ABSTRACT

In discussing the debate in the US Congress on the SALT agreements, Soviet media have generally maintained the considerable balance and caution which marked their analyses of US policy from at least the middle of 1971. Since the signing of the Moscow agreements in May 1972, the Soviets have continued to report American misgivings about those agreements and have singled out Secretary Laird (among others) for fairly strong criticism in connection with his request for new weapons developments as a concomitant of the SALT agreements. However, these reports have appeared in a context indicating that a majority, in and out of Congress, support the agreements, and that most US observers expected ratification. More recent commentary has shifted to greater emphasis on the future course of US policy, in apparent preparation for the beginning of SALT II.

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Emphasis on "Realism"

Emphasis on the increased "realism" of US policy had been a feature of Soviet commentary for nearly a year before the Moscow summit, and this theme has continued to appear in most subsequent reporting. It has always been qualified, however, by reference to reactionary circles and the like.

Following this pattern, in June Soviet media noted an apparent contrast between Secretary Laird's pursuit of funds for new weapons systems as a condition for approval of the SALT agreements and President Nixon's unqualified support for those agreements. Early August reporting of the Senate's approval of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty was juxtaposed with news of the passage of a weapons procurement bill and with criticism of Senator Jackson as well as the "military-industrial complex." President Nixon's approval "in principle" of the Laird request was also noted in passing in a New Times article titled "Strategic Zig-Zags," which reported on Senate ratification of the ABM treaty.

News of the Jackson amendment itself, however, did not appear until late August, when Soviet press and radio commentators reported the amendment with a fairly detailed account of some of its earlier vicissitudes, concluding that the White House had supported it "so as not to annoy the conservatives." However, care was taken to present the Jackson position as a minority one and to emphasize that "observers" were predicting ratification of the Interim Agreement as well.

Politburo member Suslov, speaking before the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Supreme Soviet on August 23, delivered the most authoritative public analysis to date of the US disarmament debate. There he reported: "The reaction of American political leaders, including those in Congress, to the Soviet-American agreements, was in general favorable." He added, however, that "forces connected with the military-industrial complex... are doing their utmost to undermine or sidestep the agreement....", going on to denounce their efforts as being based on "the illusion that they will be able to speak with the Soviet Union from positions of strength at the impending negotiations on the limitation of strategic arms."

Suslov continued that "the Soviet Union will keep a close watch on the attempts of specific American forces to distort the spirit and letter of the treaty and the interim agreement" and "will give due consideration

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- 2 -

in its policy to any changes which may occur in the American stand." He concluded with a renewed statement of support for the SALT agreements. The Commissions proceeded to approve the ABM treaty (leaving the Interim Agreement, for the present, in limbo).

Looking to the Next Stage

A more recent and more detailed discussion of the US debate on disarmament appeared in a September 5 Izvestiya article by G. Trofimenko. In a largely positive treatment of the emphasis that "realism" and "flexibility" had reportedly acquired in US thinking vis-a-vis the Soviet Union, Trofimenko discussed briefly the possible subjects for the next stage of SALT (permanent status for the Interim Agreement, inclusion of other offensive weapons, qualitative limits). Turning then to the US domestic scene, he commented that "even rightwing leaders ...could hardly nourish serious hopes that their opposition to the agreements on limitation of strategic arms would lead to the defeat of their ratification by Congress." He observed, however, that a more dangerous opposition comes from those who, "expressing readiness to observe to the letter the USSR-US agreements on strategic arms...seem actually to demand...permission to accelerate the arms race in the directions at present not affected by the agreements."

Trofimenko warned that such action, violating the "common spirit of agreement," "endangers the effectiveness of the agreements themselves." He concluded with a call for adherence to the "letter and spirit" of the agreements, and for "readiness to act on a broad circle of problems within the spirit of the decisions taken in Moscow...."

In this article he also presented the concept of "sufficiency" in US strategic policy as reflecting a serious reappraisal rather than the tactical shift he described in an article in USA of December 1971, which focused on "realistic deterrence." Thus, he appears to have modified somewhat his more cynical tone on US policy, outlined in his earlier paper, where he had concluded: "Thus the 'realism' of the new [US] strategy is reduced to modifications of imperialist strategy...keeping unchanged its expansionist foreign policy aims and philosophy of force."

A Balance of Hope and Caution

As these comments suggest, the basic Soviet media treatment of the US action on SALT appears to have remained essentially consistent during the

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- 3 -

past year or more; pretty much the same combination of hope and caution has characterized discussions throughout the period. There have been variations in tone, reflecting the course of negotiations and the US domestic debate, but at least since the signing of the agreements in Moscow there has been no indication of real alarm regarding US acceptance of them.

Soviet accounts of the Jackson amendment issue have not described US press reportage of the various qualifications attributed to White House support of the amendment from time to time, although these were doubtless noted by the Soviets themselves. However, there has been a somewhat greater emphasis on negative concerns as indicated by Suslov and Trofimenko, which seems clearly directed at the next round of SALT. It is probably intended to serve the dual purpose of warning the US that the Soviet Union will not be intimidated into a disadvantageous settlement, and of demonstrating to the Soviet people (particularly harder-line elements of the Party) that the government is alert to the dangers and will guard against them.

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